

Webster's definitions are simple and straightforward.

Music: The science or art of pleasing expressive or intelligible combination of tones; the art of making such combinations, especially into compositions of definite structure and significance.

Sing: To produce musical tones by the voice with musical inflections and modulations.

Music is more art than science, since it is not subject always to inflexible laws, especially in its effect upon creatures. A wide latitude for taste and preference must be allowed. What is pleasing to one may be offensive to another, without any consistently identifiable reason. The Bible does not speak exhaustively on the subject. Therefore, some of that which we wish to explore cannot be expressed in dogmatic terms. Some of our conclusions will rest upon historical and personal observations and experience.

God has so constituted man that he uses music and singing as a means to expressing his innermost feelings, as a vehicle to accompany the verbalized themes of joy, sorrow, victory, defeat, submission, defiance, exultation, contempt, adoration, love and hate. It can also be used to *prove* moods of excitement, recklessness, caution, melancholy, nostalgia, purity, lewdness, courage, fear and other affections.

Singing and music reach their most sublime peak in songs and hymns of adoration sung by the redeemed in adoration of their God and Saviour. The first song in the Bible is Moses' song of redemption in Exodus 15. Sung by the Hebrews in view of their great deliverance from Egyptian bondage, it embodies all that is true, sound, edifying and glorifying to God in all the songs of the church throughout its history. It is the same song of the redeemed heard in Revelation 15:3-4.

For the purpose of this paper, we choose to confine our thoughts to this realm of music, that which is used in the exercise of religion, or more particularly, Christianity; and to examine the validity of various respective uses, applications, styles, types and presentations.

On the positive side, music and singing is used for worship. This would include expressive praise and adoration of God, testimonies of His works, and instructive edification. On the negative, or at least questionable side, religious music can be appreciated simply for the skillful performance rendered or the pleasant entertainment it affords. Its use as a means to manipulate moods and invoke impulsive, irrational response and commitment from people is certainly suspect.

We generally call our regular church meetings "worship" services. They consist of Bible reading, prayer, singing, preaching, and sometimes, offerings and evangelistic appeals. How much of this can we properly call congregational worship in the pure sense of the word? Preaching is nearly always done by one man. We call upon two or three persons to lead us in a "word" of prayer. Sometimes the congregation shares in a responsive scripture reading. Certainly everyone can participate in the giving of money. But when does the congregation join in free, spontaneous, concerted worship?

The natural and scriptural place for this is in that portion of our meetings that we call the "song service". But the traditional pattern of established churches today will not permit that. In the first place, you have a person in "charge" of the singing called a "song leader". He decides what and how many songs will be sung, how much of them will be sung (usually first, second and third verses or just first and last in the case of a three-verse song), and the tempo in which they will be rendered. He attempts to control this tempo by widely varying styles of "conducting", waving his hands and arms about, imitating the maestro conducting a symphony. Usually people not only do not understand the gesticulations, but they do not even observe them, since their eyes are glued to the song book.

But even this sort of meager participation has become more and more limited in recent years, in favor of "special music". A congregation is scarcely permitted to sing more than a portion of two hymns. The rest of the singing time is taken up with trained choir renditions, quartets, trios, duets, solos and instrumentals.

These, I think, are the main reasons: 1) The grand old hymns of ages past have given way to lighter, more shallow, superficial themes designed to provoke a response in modern evangelistic campaigns. They contain little to glorify God and much to exalt man. 2) Neo-evangelism and content-less preaching has filled our churches with unconverted people who do not know the true God and cannot sing to Him. 3) The dominance of the "song leader" so dampens and disgusts the spirit in the few saints that they have little heart to sing either. 4) In an effort to raise the standard and quality of church music from such a depressive malaise, music directors have resorted to talented trained singers who render an admirable performance, and do our worshipping for us. Choirs, quartets, trios, duets, solos, and instrumentals. All we need do is clap or yell "Amen!"

Of all these, the least objectionable is the choir. At least it is made of a larger number of people, affords more people opportunity of expression, and bears a closer resemblance to congregational worship. But a closer look will prove it more a curse than a blessing. It harms true congregational singing in this way: The best and most volumous singers are taken out of the congregation, leaving it with the weakest and poorest voices. The people are thus robbed of their true song leaders, their "chief singers", which if left among them would have greatly encouraged the singing of everyone. Instead, they are now compared unfavorably and discouragingly to the performing choir. It is a grievous division of the body, a gathering of all the "voices" into one group, leaving the *body* muted.

Enter electronic technology. The size of a building, excellency of natural acoustics, the fact that a whisper in the pulpit can be heard in the last pew . . . all of these have nothing to say when it comes to electronic amplification of music. Expensive, elaborate control consoles, powerful amplifiers, and massive speakers are lugged into the smallest sanctuary and turned up so that the walls are nearly blasted off their foundations. Each performer has his own personal microphone which he holds daintily between thumb and

forefingers, tilted at precisely the same angle used by his favorite pop-singer while he bawls, rolls his eyes, sways and writhes expressively. Not only volume, but quality of voice is synthetically produced by the technician at the console. The most mediocre voice can thus be made to sound like a Lena Horne or a George Shea. Phony, Phony, Phony!

Please understand that I am not calling these singers phony. It may never have occurred to them that what comes out of those speakers is not their voice, but an electronic fabrication. Amplification is needed in some cases, especially out-doors or in unusually large buildings with poor acoustics. But otherwise, *please*, let us hear a *person*, not electronic tones.

Then there is that horrid sound-track. Considering all or any instruments or musicians among the assembled saints unworthy of accompanying his voice, the singer brings in a recording of music canned on a tape by hired professionals and turns it on. He then sings along with this sterile mechanical contraption. Out with it!! Shall we bid a gifted musician lay his instrument aside, refuse him the opportunity of offering his labor in worship and sit idly by while we listen to a machine? Absurd. If no one can play his music, let him sing accapella. Several years ago I witnessed a pitiable spectacle in a small church in the mountains of Colorado. Their pianist was about to move away. So they would not be deprived of music for worship, they had her record on tape most of their usual hymns. The awkward attempt of the congregation to sing along with that canned music was ludicrous. The tape told them what songs they would sing, in what order, when to start and stop, and brooked nothing in between. Worship? Impossible! They threw out the tape and worshipped God in glorious accapella liberty. One cannot worship while chained to a recording.

If one should defend this practice on the basis that it brings in a more excellent quality of music, then, we ask, should not the preacher to the same? Have him play one of W. A. Criswell's messages instead of his own stumbling, faltering attempts to preach the gospel. And why not play some fine recorded prayers instead of the crude, unlearned cries from the heart of the people? Are the Lord's ears pleased with the fine modulation of our music, the theological orthodoxy of our prayers, the eloquence and persuasiveness of our preaching? Or does He delight in the offerings of a loving, grateful, redeemed heart, regardless of how unpretty it may sound to human ears?

An honest and candid consideration of the above will reveal that this sort of music and singing is not unto God but unto ourselves, and that it is not worship but entertainment; and that such renderings are not sacrifices but performances. Certainly, entertainment itself is no evil; even that with a religious or Christian flavor. But the church worship service is not the place for it. Help yourself to all the "Christian" records, tape, stereo or whatever suits your fancy, But let us rid ourselves of the delusion that this has any part in church worship.

In an article of this sort it will be expected that I say something of the so-called "Christian" rock music. This presents something of a problem to me, since I must admit that some of these songs have orthodox theology in the lyrics, and some fine Christian friends (all relatively young people of the "rock generation") appreciate this type of music. Much has been said and written by eminent psychologists and persons of other interested fields about the destructive character of the rock beat and its immoral influence. I have no way of ascertaining the accuracy of these reports, although I am strongly inclined to agree with them. Rock music, to me, is unpleasant, harsh, nerve-wracking and offensive. It is a horrid racket, and fits better with savage paganism than civilized Christianity. I also have much difficulty with most of the contemporary songs written to popular or country-western type music. Even when the lyrics are good, my aversion to the music drowns out the words. For me, such music does not adorn the gospel.

But these are personal tastes. There is a more sound objection to them, and that is this: When we set our worship songs to the same kind of music of the wicked immoral songs of the world, we identify with them. When a sinner converted from the world hears that type of music, the evil words, thoughts and lusts come back to him, whether he realizes it or not. All the sounds, smells, sights, and sensations of his old wicked life in the flesh are stirred and stimulated by the music of his old life. This has to be a grievous stumbling block for a weak brother. There is a better way. We can avoid that.

Having now pointed out that which is false, stifling and injurious of worship in music, we should be ready to offer something positive in its place. God willing, we shall be bold to do just that. But first, let it be clear that the following is not recommended as a patch on an old garment. True worship in music cannot fit into a church which is organized and functioning in such a way as to militate against it in every other thought and activity. *It will not work.* If we expect to enjoy the blessings of spiritual body life in music, we must be ready to overhaul the whole church system that embodies a false philosophy and concept of the Christian church and its worship. It will take too much space to go into all of that here. It is sufficient to say that this will be too much for a church that has for many years been comfortably ensconced in a traditional man-centered mode that is alien to primitive Christianity. An old wine skin cannot handle new wine. Fill it with new wine and it will burst. A little new wine introduced with the old will corrupt both. If you are content with the old, it is best if you stay with it. You would not like the new, and you will ruin the old while you are finding it out.

What we have to say is offered to those who either have the privilege of beginning with a new congregation, or those who have become so sick and weary of religion and are so hungering for congregational worship of the true God in spirit and in truth, that they are willing to throw out all the old wine, bottle and all, and begin anew with an open Bible, heart and mind.

Four critical areas will be addressed:

1. Abolish the office of song leader or music director. It has no New Testament support whatever. If the congregation is to worship freely and spontaneously, it must not have one person telling it what to do, how to do it, and how long to do it. Worship cannot be promoted or man controlled. Worship is promoted and controlled by the Holy Spirit in the heart of each individual believer. And in the congregation He is able to do it in concert. Spirit controlled (filled) believers will "*speak among themselves in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in their hearts to the Lord*" (Ephesians 5:18-20). Flesh controlled church-goers with no love of God and truth, who must be pumped up and carried along by a grinning song leader, will offer no praise to God.

Let the people select their own songs, calling out the number from the midst. Let them sing all the verses with the tempo and expression of their hearts. And let them sing as long as they desire to worship in this manner.

2. It will be evident that the above, when practiced, will play havoc with rigid time schedules. Therefore, the whole and every part of our meetings must be open-ended. Whatever follows the singing time (usually preaching) does not have to start and stop at a particular time. Post worship time appointments and schedules will have to go by the board. Worshipping saints cannot be worried about the roast in the oven, ball games, visiting relatives, driving the bus load of kids home, or even getting home in time to rest a bit before getting back to church for the “evening service”. How dare we complain if the worship service lasts all day? If it is truly worship, do we have some better way to spend the Lord’s day?

It is readily consented that such a meeting can get out of order and run wild in the flesh. For an unsanctified crowd, this is not only possible, but likely. It is the responsibility of the elders to see that all things are done decently and in order. In the midst of the songs there may be spontaneous prayers, exhortations, scripture readings. One may be led to lead out in a chorus not in the song book. Spiritual elders will guide such worship with wisdom and discernment. When it becomes evident that the spiritual mood of the people has been sufficiently expressed, he can bring an end to it before it becomes wearisome or grievous.

3. Some changes will need to be made concerning music material available to the congregation. As they come to worship God, they will want to sing more God-honoring songs. These will most generally be found in the old historic hymnals. Publishers of song books must make a profit. In order to do this, they must protect themselves by copyright. They can copyright a book only if it has a certain minimum number of either new songs or old songs sufficiently rearranged so as to permit a new copyright. The new songs are nearly always inferior, since they reflect the shallow theology and humanistic spirit of today’s religion. The old songs are always worsened by contemporary rearrangement. For these reasons, one cannot purchase a song book with only grand old hymns.

Nearly every hymnal, however, will have a surprising number of the old songs. Modern congregations, for the most part, ignore them, singing and knowing only a couple dozen or so of the lighter nature that have become so hackneyed by use that the people mouth them in boredom. Begin by finding those good old hymns and learning to sing them.

If necessary, replace your hymnal. At some time in the future you will want to have a supplemental printed of old hymns whose copyrights have been expired for years. Some also have a supplemental chorus book of scriptures set to music.

- The question may be raised as to how the congregation is to learn these songs without a song leader. Simply let the musicians play them through and then begin to follow along. The “chief singers” will lead out and the rest will follow. It is amazing how quickly a spiritual people will latch on to a new song and sing it with gusto. If it is worthy, they will delight in it. You don’t have much trouble teaching a kid to eat ice cream the first time. Give him a taste and you will not be able to take it away from him.

4. How about “special music”, quartets, trios, duets, solos, and instrumentals? The negative things we said about these at the beginning must not be taken to attack their validity, but their abuse. There is a very real place for gifted persons to give a testimony of praise and adoration to the Lord in music. Solos may be sung at Spirit-appointed times in the midst of congregational singing. Sometimes the congregational singing can be introduced or begun by such special music. There is nothing wrong with having special music just before the preached message. In such a case, however, we do not need a string of them. *One* is sufficient to exhort our hearts and prepare us for the word of God.

Nor is there any scriptural warrant for hostility to “singings” and concerts where the saints are gathered for that specific purpose. Such meetings do provide opportunity for fleshy exhibitions and unworthy religious songs. But the saints should not be deprived of valid edifying entertainment and expression simply because the world abuses it. What we are saying is this: The congregational worship service is not the place for it.

One other thing should be noted. We gather many times for other purposes than congregational worship. Sometimes we gather for prayer meetings, Bible studies, Bible conferences. It is a mistake to assume that we must have a “song service” to prelude these things. Certainly they should not be preceded by a worship service of the type described above. If we have met to pray, then let us get on with it. If we have invited and appointed a speaker for a particular time, let’s hear him. Either a song or two or no singing is all that is needed to introduce these sessions. Let us not become so intent on our agenda, however, that we rule the Holy Spirit out of them. He may want to turn a Bible conference into a worship service. If so, Come, O Breath of God! We welcome You!

Some godly pastors and song leaders may be stung or offended by some of my remarks. I certainly do not intend any personal offense. We often serve in an inferior and unspiritual way for years, not knowing any better, while all along knowing that something is sadly defective. I want to affirm my love and appreciation for all who serve our worthy Lord Jesus with a true heart to the best of their knowledge and ability. But I also long to help the saints to “*serve God more acceptably with reverence and godly fear*” (*Hebrews 12:28*).

- C. M.